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TITLE: The New South Wales Health Needle Clean Up Line

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ISSUE: New South Wales (NSW) – the most populous Australian state – has a had an extensive Needle and Syringe Exchange Program (NSEP) since 1986, which is internationally recognized as a cornerstone of Australia's success in HIV prevention. However arrangements for disposing of inappropriately discarded needles and responding to complaints varied among different locations in the state, were inconsistent and were often addressed to Police, Local Government agencies, or Public Health facilities. Increasingly public and media expressed concerns about NSEP, which put it at risk.

SETTING: The Albion Street Center which operates the NSW HIV/AIDS Information Line was approached by the NSW Health Department to operate a state wide toll-free telephone service to be an accessible response service to arrange for collection of discarded needles. Staff and volunteers give callers an opportunity to express concerns, monitor complaints, refer information about discarded needles to a local contact person (who arranges for clean up), and monitor caller satisfaction.

RESULTS: In the first year of operation, since March 1998, the service received 1290 calls, which resulted in the clean up of over 3,000 needles and syringes.

LESSONS: The service has filled a need in the provision of needle exchange services and helped to alleviate the confusion about disposal responsibilities. Callers expressed satisfaction in having their concerns addressed with one telephone call. Local government and other agencies supported the service because it improved their customer relations by offering an appropriate referral service.

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